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Ukraine and the militarization of Europe

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The conflict in Ukraine is being utilized to reshape political and social relations in Europe. In the process, the most right-wing forces, which have little support in the population, are setting the tone.

They are using the crisis, provoked by the US, Germany and NATO, to transform Europe into a military fortress. They are not only risking nuclear war with Russia, but also subordinating Europe to an iron discipline.

The NATO military alliance, dominated by the US, has virtually assumed control of European politics. At the end of this week, the biannual NATO summit, to be held in Wales, will agree a new strategic policy with historic implications.

“In future, the defence of alliance territory will once again be central after a decade in which all efforts were concentrated on foreign missions in far away places in the world,” writes the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagzeitung*. By this it means that the massive military resources of the alliance are to be refocused on Russia, as was the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Among other things, the summit will agree the formation of two intervention forces, ready to act against Russia within days. This first is a 4,000- to 20,000-strong “vanguard” of the already existing NATO Response Force (NRF)—one that will be able to respond more rapidly. The second is a 10,000-strong expeditionary force under British leadership, with the participation of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands.

In order to ensure the rapid deployment of these forces, NATO plans to establish bases for intelligence, logistics and planning in the Baltic states as well as Poland and Romania.

This effectively renders the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed in 1997, in which NATO committed itself not to deploy large troop contingents on the territory of the former Eastern Bloc, null and void. Poland, the Baltic states and Canada have long been demanding the cancellation of this agreement, in which Russia and NATO pledged to collaborate peacefully. To all intents, this has now been carried out.

Russia’s alleged aggression against Ukraine is constantly cited as the reason for the military moves. But this stands matters on their head. The aggression in Ukraine was instigated by the US and Germany, which supported a putsch against the elected president, Viktor Yanukovych, in which Washington and Berlin collaborated with the fascists of Svoboda and the Right Sector. The Russian reaction was entirely predictable.

The crisis in Ukraine was provoked and manipulated as a pretext for the militarization of Europe and, in particular, the surmounting of the deep-seated popular opposition to war and militarism in Germany. It is impossible within the framework of this article to list all of the lies and distortions employed over recent months to aggravate the crisis and exploit it for propaganda purposes. One thing, however, has remained constant: the exclusion by NATO of any negotiated settlement with Russia.

The real reason for NATO’s strategic change of course lies in the insoluble crisis of American and European capitalism. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the lie that the European Union, after perhaps a temporary lean period, will become a haven of general well being and social security has been shattered.

Especially in the Eastern European countries, the majority of the population has to contend with unemployment, poverty wages and the collapse of old age, health and social welfare provisions. The social situation of the working population is much worse than at the time of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes 25 years ago, while a small, corrupt and criminal minority has enormously enriched itself. But in Southern Europe too, and in the wealthier center of the continent, the working class has faced one wave of austerity after another. Social relations in Europe are strained to breaking point.

The attempt to redefine Europe on the basis of the conflict between East and West is the response of the ruling elites to the bankruptcy of the project of the European Union. The EU is today despised by broad social layers, which correctly view it as an instrument of powerful capitalist interests. At the same time, conflicts and tensions are increasing between the European powers, especially between Germany and France.

The confrontation with Russia, as we wrote in April, “is aimed at unifying a divided European Union and silencing all social opposition. Previously, the identity of the EU was grounded on economic issues, such as the free movement of capital and goods and the common currency. In future, the struggle against a common enemy will replace economics as the basis of the EU’s internal cohesion.” This analysis has been fully confirmed.

The ruling class is reacting to this crisis as it did 100 and 75 years ago—with militarism and war. The militarization of foreign policy and of society as a whole serves imperialist aims—the conquest of new spheres of influence, markets and sources of raw material—as well as the deflection of social tensions outward and the strengthening of the police powers of the state at home.

It is no accident that well-known representatives of social reaction stand at the head of the war campaign against Russia.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who never tires of stoking up the conflict with Russia, was the first Danish premier to rely on the support of the far-right Danish Peoples Party. The author of the book *From Welfare State to Minimal State*, he oversaw the redistribution of wealth from those at the bottom to those at the top and introduced Europe’s most restrictive immigration policy in previously tolerant Denmark. He was awarded the post of NATO general secretary as a reward for his dispatch of Danish troops to Iraq after the US-British invasion in 2003.

The appointment of Donald Tusk as the new president of the European Council must also be seen in this context. The Polish prime minister brings “the experience of anti-communism and anti-Soviet resistance to everyday Brussels,” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. “From a central European perspective,” the newspaper continued, that could be “quite useful in the present crisis.”

Tusk counts among the leading architects of the February putsch in Kiev. He even managed to transform the official commemoration of the beginning of World War II into an anti-Russian demonstration—as if the invasion of Poland had not been the launching pad for Hitler’s war of extermination against the Soviet Union. Speaking September 1 at the Westerplatte near Gdansk, Tusk argued that the German attack 75 years ago allows the Poles today “to say loudly that nobody has the right to block our initiatives, whose aim is effective NATO action.” He warned against the slogan “never again war” becoming a manifesto of the weak.

With its moves against Russia, NATO is placing the fate of Europe in the hands of hysterical anti-communists who enriched themselves from capitalist restoration, such as Lithuanian President Dali Grybauskaitė, who recently declared that Russia was “practically at war with Europe.” Then there are the Ukrainian oligarchs, such as President Petro Poroshenko and the regional governor of Dnipropetrovsk, Ihor Kolomoyskyi, who finances the fascist militia Azov Battalion. A provocation from this quarter would be sufficient to make a catastrophic war with Russia almost inevitable.

There is not a trace of opposition from all the other establishment parties in Europe. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party and the Greens stand fully behind the revival of German militarism. They voted for a breach in the dam of German foreign policy on, of all days, September 1, the 75th anniversary of Germany's assault on Poland. For the first time since the Second World War, the German government is sending weapons to a war zone by arming the Kurdish Peshmerga in Northern Iraq with antitank rockets. The sending of weapons is only the prelude to sending soldiers to safeguard the interests of German imperialism in the Middle East.

The Left Party has also repeatedly condemned Russian "aggression" in Ukraine, and so declared their support for German militarism. If they occasionally criticise the policies of the government, they do so in the knowledge that their parliamentary support is not required. For them, it is a tactical matter of heading off and suffocating the opposition of the overwhelming majority of the population.

In the current crisis, Russia is without doubt the victim of a provocation, but the reaction of President Vladimir Putin is an expression of the political bankruptcy of his regime. The Russian regime emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the devastating effects of which are becoming ever more clear. Based on the defence of the interests of oligarchs who have amassed billions through the looting of state property, the Putin government is organically incapable of turning to the European and international working class. Instead, it appeals to Russian nationalism. This reactionary policy, which fuels divisions between workers in Russia, Ukraine and the rest of Europe, is one of the main trump cards held by imperialism.

The politics of the European bourgeoisie is a mixture of ruthless aggression and desperation. Confronted with the hopeless crisis of their system, they are rushing toward a catastrophe, just as they did in 1914 and 1939.

Only the working class can prevent such a catastrophe. It must unite internationally and fight for the overthrow of capitalism. The struggle against war is inseparable from the struggle for socialism. The most important prerequisite is the construction of an international revolutionary party—the International Committee of the Fourth International—and its national sections, the Socialist Equality parties.